Response to Request for Information:
Broadband Initiatives Program and
Broadband Technology Opportunities
Program

November 30, 2009

Overview

Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) commends the United States Departments of Agriculture and Commerce on their successful management of the Broadband Initiatives Program and Broadband Technology Opportunities Program to date, and thanks the agencies for providing an opportunity for input into the process and program designs before the second round of funding is launched. OATS is a leading provider of technology training, services, community programs, and support for senior citizens in New York City, and is currently exploring strategic partnerships to expand its programs to additional states and cities.

The comments offered below are targeted specifically at the issues pertaining to broadband use and adoption by older adults, and are based on the organization's experience providing over 7000 hours of community based technology training and programs to older adults since 2004.

1) About OATS

Since 2004, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) has spearheaded the nation's largest and most successful municipal technology initiative for senior citizens in New York City, developing partnerships with over 40 community organizations to reach over 5,000 older adults throughout the five boroughs.

OATS teaches intensive, multi-week trainings to senior citizens at home and in community technology labs on topics ranging from computer basics to health research and workforce skills. OATS programs have achieved national recognition as a model for engaging, training, and supporting older adults to use computers and broadband access to improve their health, social engagement, access to services, and quality of life.

- Partnerships: OATS has never operated a single program without partnering with another nonprofit. The organization is one of the most inter-connected nonprofits in the city, having worked intensively with senior centers, recreation centers, public schools, housing developments, hospitals, government agencies, and multi-service organizations. OATS

has successfully negotiated and managed over $700,000 in earned-income contracts with community-based partners since 2004.

- Training: OATS has over 900 pages of curriculum designed for training older adults in computer basics, advanced computing, workforce applications, and civic engagement skills. Typical courses last ten weeks and utilize a participatory, problem-solving methodology designed to make optimal use of older adults' learning preferences. Participant evaluations are overwhelmingly positive, with more than 85 percent reporting more social connections to friends and family, improved access to health information, and increased confidence living independently in the community.

- In-home programs: Since 2007, OATS has generated directly or through partnerships over 2,000 home visits to provide technology training, equipment installation, Internet configuration, and technical support for low-income older adults. Partners have included Jewish Home Lifecare, DOROT, Per Scholas, and New York Academy of Medicine. OATS is currently collaborating with Maimonides Medical Center on a pilot project to deliver home-based technology training to a group of patients in collaboration with the Maimonides Department of Geriatrics.

- Building Community: OATS provides intergenerational training at over a dozen sites, bringing high school students and seniors together in collaborative learning projects that enhance community linkages, offer customized training for seniors, and help at-risk youth stay in school and gain preparation for higher education and the workforce. OATS also operates the Senior Planet Digital Community for seniors at seniorplanet.org, which includes a weekly calendar of senior friendly events distributed to over 1,700 seniors and caregivers; a wiki-based resource guide; senior blogs; and a video-teleconferencing initiative that links seniors in live video seminars with other senior centers and invited experts.

- Raising Awareness: OATS programs have been featured in *The New York Times, New York Daily News, El Diario, Gotham Gazette, NY1 News, NBC Channel 4 News,* and numerous radio and local media outlets. OATS was featured in 2008 as a "Best of the Region" presenter at the national Grantmakers in Aging conference. OATS was cited as a national model in *The Impact of Broadband on Seniors*, a report issued by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the organization's workforce programs were highlighted as a case study in *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Digital Age Gap,* by Rob Salkowitz (published by Wiley Press as part of the Microsoft Executive Leadership Series). OATS participants and leadership have testified at numerous public hearings and conferences on the value of technology adoption and services for older adults.

OATS typically works in low-income, minority communities in partnership with neighborhood organizations that serve vulnerable populations. Most participants are low-income individuals who participate in nutrition and other programs are local senior centers and multi-service agencies. 48 percent report a significant physical disability. 31 percent are white. 48 percent live alone. Virtually all are over the age of 60 (the average age is 72), and many are frail elders in their 80s and even 90s (age does not seem to correlate to success in OATS classes).

OATS is a high-capacity organization whose leadership combines decades of experience serving New York's communities through social services, technology programs, and senior services.

The organization has raised over $2,000,000 since its founding in 2004 to help older adults live better, healthier, more connected lives using computers and broadband technology. OATS is currently conducting an intensive year-long "social impact demonstration and analysis" of its program model in partnership with researchers from the New York Academy of Medicine, with funding provided by the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, which will provide extensive information on the results and benefits of OATS training and community building programs.

2) Comments Pertaining to Section 2, A of the RFI: Funding Priorities and Objectives.

OATS believes a stronger emphasis should be placed on broadband adoption in the funding balance for the second round. Our experience working with senior citizens indicates that the vast majority of older adults have access to adequate broadband services, yet do not adopt broadband due to lack of computer ownership; lack of age-appropriate training and support; lack of awareness of the value proposition of technology adoption; and lack of resources to pay ongoing costs associated with ISP services, hardware and software. These conclusions are supported by data from the Pew Trust and other studies of Internet use by seniors. For the tens of millions of older adults who are not online today, broadband adoption challenges are the key barrier to success.

Investments in broadband adoption services and programs should be the highest priority for helping older adults get online, and should be combined with targeted investment in public computer centers and, where necessary, infrastructure projects. But it is our experience that most older adults have access to community based technology facilities but often cannot use it because the facilities have insufficient funding and capacity to provide quality training and programs that are appropriate for senior citizen learners. Where older individuals are concerned, it is not sufficient to build a lab, wire up the internet, and turn on the lights. Seniors need curriculum and training and community building projects that recognize the special challenges that older adults face in using technology, that build on their life-long experiences as assets in the learning process, and that provide training in "felt-needs" such as health research and improving social engagement. In addition, many older adults cannot use community facilities due to mobility or other impairments, and must receive training at home.

These are principally challenges that relate to broadband adoption, and their urgency should be reflected in the balance of funds available. OATS recommends that half of the overall funds available through BTOP should be dedicated to sustainable broadband adoption services and programs.

Comments pertaining to Section II, A, 3 of the RFI: Targeted Populations.

Should RUS and NTIA allocate a portion of the remaining funds to specific population groups?

Multiple studies indicate that senior citizens are the group most underserved by broadband technology. Seniors are less likely to go online than any other demographic segment in America, and are less likely to have broadband at home. And while the causes of this phenomenon are more complex than simple lack of access to broadband infrastructure, the effects are insidious: social isolation, depression, reduced access to health care, fewer prospects for income, higher costs for goods and services. It is imperative that we break the cycle of late adoption of technology by seniors, which then reinforces the stereotypes of older adults not using technology, which in turn

leads to under-investment in programs, goods, and services targeted to seniors by the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

Achieving progress in technology adoption, access, and utilization by older adults has enormous benefits that go beyond the basic notions of web surfing and email. As major investments in Health IT, telemedicine, personal health records, and the "patient centered medical home" are reshaping the health care landscape for older adults, technology programs hold out the promise of facilitating meaningful use of these resources and programs by a large number of older adults. Recent surveys of seniors online indicate positive effects in reducing the incidence of depression. Digital literacy and utilization can provide a linchpin for intergenerational activities, civic engagement and voluntarism, and workforce development opportunities.

A dedicated investment of resources designed to helping older adults overcome the technology gap would be a strong step toward helping seniors break current patterns of under-utilization of technology. OATS recommends allocating a portion of remaining funds specifically to support programs for older adults.

How can funds for Public Computer Centers and Sustainable Broadband Adoption projects be targeted to increase broadband access and use among vulnerable populations?

Organizations and agencies should be encouraged to offer comprehensive, integrated, sustainable, programs that can leverage community assets to achieve meaningful results at scale. The problems facing older adults who seek to participate in the Digital Age are complex and interrelated, so programs that make lasting change must have the range and capacity to address the full scope of the challenges faced. In brief:

- Seniors often harbor negative stereotypes about technology, as well as strong feelings of anxiety and embarrassment about their lack of knowledge. Successful programs must overcome this by providing safe spaces (physical and virtual) where older individuals can ask questions and learn in a supportive environment. In addition, programs must provide outreach and engagement activities to make an active, positive case for adoption of technology by seniors.

- Seniors have specific learning needs and benefit greatly from curriculum, methodology, and experienced, professional trainers specifically oriented toward older adults. Courses taught through local institutions that do not specialize in technology services for seniors are often unsuccessful or difficult to sustain over time.

- Sustainable programs must provide linkages to actual benefits that technology unlocks: health, socialization, public services, income, housing, creative outlets, civic engagement, etc. For instance, OATS is currently piloting a program to teach older adults to manage health information and processes through the emerging technology of personal health records (PHRs). To achieve these kinds of linkages requires subject area expertise, which in turn requires sustained commitment to high-capacity organizations that specialize in the needs of older adults.

- Services must be flexible to meet seniors where they are. Programs should be provided in collaboration with senior centers where possible, but also recreation centers (such as YMCAs), health care facilities, schools, housing developments, as well as at home for individuals with mobility impairment. A robust citywide or statewide program would provide a small number of anchor facilities to serve as an entry point and demonstration site, plus "outsource" programs delivered at multiple sites in the community and in seniors' homes as needed.

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- Access to hardware and software, broadband services, and technical support should integrate with the strategies described here, and should be linked to sustainable arrangements that maximize the behavioral, social, and physical outcomes that are crucial to the quality of life of a wide range of older adults. In addition to providing funding for public computer centers and community facilities, OATS recommends exploring the provision of a subsidy to assist low-income, mobility-impaired older adults in purchasing hardware and internet access at home.

To achieve the depth and scope of impact on the quality of life of older adults that broadband technology makes possible, it would be beneficial for BIP/BTOP to enable applicants to articulate a program that will provide a range of integrated services across a significant geography such as a municipality, county, or even state. Such services would primarily focus on encouraging and supporting broadband adoption, but would also integrate strategies for improving access to public technology centers and at-home utilization of broadband and related technologies. OATS recommends that successful applicants be encouraged to submit proposals that meet the full range of criteria described above, and that bridge activities from the sustainable adoption, public computer center, and infrastructure components of the program where statute permits.

In sum, OATS believe there is tremendous potential within BIP and BTOP to achieve strong positive benefits for older adults, and that the second round of funding should embrace a significant emphasis on the needs of senior citizens. At the same time, since the delivery mechanisms required for serving this population require extensive capacity across program areas, geography, and service capabilities, it would be ideal if the NOFA were to provide enough flexibility that a range of high-capacity institutions can apply to provide comprehensive, integrated program models that reach older individuals through a range of partnerships and locations.